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Language revolution behind the cultural curtain

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the innovative, revolutionary features of the World Englishes paradigm that shook the education world in the late 20th century. I speak about key concepts that are salient to the paradigm, such as pluricentricity, diversity, functionality, and equality as articulated by Kachru, such as inclusivity and variability, as well as the controversies emerging in and related to education, for example, the struggle between prescriptive and descriptive approaches, and norms and usage. With reference to Expanding Circle contexts such as China and Russia, I emphasize the cultural underpinnings that create the greatest challenge for intervarietal communicators, as measured in terms of Smith's (1982; 1992) notion of interpretability. Such challenges help explain the significant role assigned to intercultural communication studies in tertiary education curricula in these countries. Revealing cultural identity when speaking in English as a communicative mediating tool is not an easy task for individuals and requires a special training. No easier is the listening and negotiating of other cultural meanings, all of which sets new perspectives for researchers and educators, while also encouraging cooperation between them.

INTRODUCTION

Coming from a country with a great revolutionary past, I cannot but start my paper with an allusion to a book, well-known in the socialist world, namely: Ten Days That Shook the World (John Reed 1919). While the American journalist and author of the book spoke of the ten days of the 1917 Russian revolution, we, contemplating on the role of the World Englishes (WE) paradigm, can speak about at least two decades that shook the 20th century, revolutionized the linguistic, sociocultural, and educational world, and has had a great impact on theory and practice of the new millennium. What are the innovative and revolutionary features of the WE paradigm, which give us a reason to say that it did shake the world? To name just the most salient of the features: diversity of Englishes; pluricentricity of the language; domineering of a dynamic functionality over a static prescriptive approach; change of the goal of ELT and learning; change of the native speaker concept; and the integration of English Language Teaching (ELT) with intercultural communication studies.

For many years speakers of English have had a steadfast conviction that all the roads of teaching and learning lead to Queen’s English, which was associated with the most rightful, prestigious, and beautiful language that, due to certain reasons, embarked on the global spread. The word English itself was a synonym to British. The early revolutionary
ideas of WE were defended at the University of Edinburgh in December 1961 (2 years ago we should have celebrated its 50th anniversary) by Braj B. Kachru. His PhD dissertation ‘An analysis of some features of Indian English: A study in linguistic method’ was a pioneering work proving the reality and rightful existence of Standard Indian English as a variety defined by him as ‘the English of those Indians who speak / write English as L2 and who range above the Central point on the cline of bilingualism’ (Kachru 1961: 287).

The existence of a number of L2 varieties led to coining a new form of the word that used to be *singularia tantum* but finally lost its original grammatical features and became a noun with the regular plural – *Englishes*. As far as I know, this word form was mentioned as early as 1981 by Gerry Abbot, the then editor-in-chief of the journal *World Language English*, in his editorial to Issue number 1 of that year. In the editorial to the journal Abbot repeated the Kachruvian thesis that ‘national independence has brought a need for recognition of various African and Asian Englishes as identities in their own right’ (Abbot 1981: 2). No matter how important this declaration was for the facilitation and development of the ‘liberation linguistics’ (Kachru 1991), however, it was probably this article that promoted one of the fallacies of equating WE to an interlanguage. In the editorial, Abbot argued: ‘We can therefore regard the NE [New Englishes] as a sort of communal “interlanguage” somewhere between the target language (TL) and the MT [mother tongue]’ (Abbot 1981: 2). This conception of interlanguage as a stative individual, psycholinguistic phenomenon is still under discussion and has been addressed by Kachru and his supporters (Davies 1989; Kachru 1983, 1996; Y. Kachru 1994) who take the view that unlike interlanguage, a social variety is a dynamic cline, an element of the world Englishes family.

**WORLD ENGLISHES AND WE**

The journal whose title contained the new plural form—*World Englishes*—came out in press in 1985, co-edited by Braj Kachru and Larry Smith who were courageous enough and well insistent on codifying the new form in the journal title. As they pointed out in the editorial to Issue number 2 (1985), this was a reincarnation of the journal *World Language English*, which had existed only for four years, and this reincarnation represented new ideas that have lain in the basis of the new paradigm. Quoting their introduction of the newly titled journal, we should mention that in it the co-editors highlighted the new credo that has become a basic principle of the paradigm: ‘The editorial board considers the native and non-native users of English as equal partners in deliberations on uses of English and its teaching internationally . . . The acronym WE therefore aptly symbolizes the underlying philosophy of the journal and the aspiration of the Editorial Board.’ (Kachru and Smith 1985: 210).

The acronym WE can also serve as a symbol of the principle of inclusivity that is the cornerstone of our paradigm. Many of us have heard or at least read an insightful presidential speech given by Daniel Davis at the 15th annual meeting of the IAWE in Cebu (2009) and later published in *WE* (Davis 2010). The World Englishes paradigm is inclusive of all varieties and variants of English, of many cultures and ethnicities, of many topics and subjects, of various approaches and perspectives. This inclusivity also received in-depth coverage in a fundamental article by Bolton (2005). Inclusivity embraces both developed and developing nations, as witnessed by the term *developmental world Englishes* (Bolton et al. 2011), albeit with the caveat that this may not be the best term to use in an enterprise that emphasizes the fundamental equality of world Englishes.
With the spread of the WE paradigm, the number of studies that have embraced the paradigm has grown. Vol. 4 No 2 of *World Englishes* (1985) published a list of submitted dissertations related to the focus of world Englishes. These dissertations (the very first one mentioned dates back to 1981) looked at Nigerian, Zimbabwean, South-African and other Englishes, fixing the plural form of the term and spreading it in the global scholarship. Among the authors we find names that are very well known today: Cecil Nelson, Peter Lowenberg, and many others. While in 1985 the list of the submitted dissertations was restricted to one page only (though not bound geographically, including universities in the USA, India, and Nigeria), in 1987 a similar list took eight pages though all the dissertations were submitted to the US universities within mostly a two-year period (1984–5), with only one work dated by 1986. Thus, the revolutionary concept of diverse Englishes has become a codified and legitimate term, though even now it sometimes makes those who are outside of our paradigm raise their eyebrows and doubt its legitimacy.

**THE DIVERSITY OF ENGLISHES**

The diversity of Englishes has put an end to the idea of the unique role of British English as a standard model, and even a bicentric model of British/American English, though in many countries of the Expanding Circle this idea is still deeply rooted in the minds of education officials as well as laypeople, and the pluricentricity of English is regarded by many of them as a paradigmatic riot. For example, the Russian Federation Educational Standards in Foreign Languages (and English is one of them, studied at school) formulates an integral objective of foreign language learning as developing a communicative competence in a foreign language, that is, developing students’ ability to communicate with and achieve mutual understanding with *native speakers* – only! This objective is in drastic opposition to the goal of foreign language teaching set by the same Standards – facilitating an individual’s social adaptation to the ever changing polycultural and multilingual world (*Primernye programmy* 2010). Ironically, our learners and users of English have to become adapted to the polycultural world by talking only to native speakers! We can see that the innovative idea of polycentricity of Englishes launched by the revolutionary paradigm is still to be fought for. The revolution is going on.

I believe that it will be very helpful in this fight to highlight the principle of variability that makes the foundation of the WE paradigm along with other principles. ‘Multiple speakers from a range of different backgrounds actually add to the feature pool, increasing the potential variation in a language’ (Van Rooy 2010: 7). While discussing what kind of English is to be taught at school, what models of English are to be followed, we must give more way to the expanding variability of English. This is especially important for the Expanding Circle varieties that remain norm-dependent and have to rely on certain norms, especially in teaching and learning. However, these are not the norms of British or American English only. Variability includes variants of all varieties—those of them that are recognized as their national standards should be presented as a model for teaching, without eliminating the trends of new developing varieties, and, no doubt, in the end it will be a students’ national model as the output of the education process (in Russia, Russia’s English model used by highly educated Russians; in China, China English model comprising standardized variants of language forms typical of other varieties as well). Our students have the right to know that in Australia speakers often displace diphthongs [ei / ai], that in South Asia nouns like *equipment, furniture* and the like might acquire the plural
ending, etc., and they can use these forms. But they should also know the appropriate contexts of these variants.

The focus of the WE paradigm on linguistic variation has become one of the reasons for the paradigm criticism on the part of the so-called ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) movement that seems to have branched from our paradigm. For example, Alessia Cogo and Martin Dewey in their recently published book ‘Analysing English as a Lingua Franca. A Corpus-driven Investigation’ (2012: 13) write:

while WE celebrates the pluricentric nature of English, with its primary focus on the identification of stable features whose presence most characterizes a particular national version of English, it has thus been particularly concerned with a process of delineating these varieties . . . As a result descriptive work of this kind has often prioritized surface-level linguistic features, often in the process highlighting the difference between each of the nativized Englishes.

They see the main difference between the WE and ELF paradigms in the fact that the ELF researchers emphasize similarities (mostly in linguistic behavior). However, accusations of the surface research and descriptivism is what the WE studies deserve least of all. For interest in the functional aspect, along with the concern about intelligibility of form, comprehensibility of meaning and interpretability of sense has always been the object of WE researchers. That is why it is unfair to blame the WE research for operating primarily ‘within a variationist tradition’ (Cogo and Dewey 2012: 8). The idea of variation and variety is indeed one of the central ideas of the paradigm but by no means detached from social and communicative functioning.

Talk about variability and model of English brings me to another revolutionary idea contributed by the WE paradigm to linguistics and especially pedagogy. This is the idea of dynamic functionality prevalence over a static prescriptive approach, which has dominated in education. This means a shift from correctness to appropriateness as didactic principles of language teaching. The proponents of the WE paradigm have argued that the communicative function and its successful implementation is much more important than an ideally correct verbalization of a thought. For many teachers accustomed to doing away with students’ errors as their primary responsibility, this idea may seem strange, to put it mildly. The new didactic position has appeared with the communicative approach in ELT and found both linguistic and pedagogical groundings in the WE paradigm. As far as I know, the ‘Japanese with English abilities’ strategic plan adopted in 2002 and being implemented in Japan demonstrates the importance and dominance of functionality as a principle of ELT in Japanese schools. This principle is contrasted to the requirements of the so called ‘exam English’ oriented towards correctness in completing tests. However, many schools are still under pressure to make a choice between correctness and functionality in their ELT programs.

‘NATIVE SPEAKER’ AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Thus the WE paradigm has reversed the focus of ELT from the norm as a requirement of language structure stability to the dynamic language usage which lies at the heart of communication, and a successful user of English, as defined by Prodromou (2008), rather than a perfect near-native speaker has become the most important objective of English language teaching and learning. The concept of native speaker has also been radically
revised due to the WE paradigm. The term has become broader in scope and combinability. Since English is owned by the global population and is represented by different varieties, each with distinctive features, the term *native speaker* refers to communicatively efficient and ‘fully competent’ (Ur 2009) users of varieties. I would like to quote here an excerpt from the article by Larry Smith that was published in Vladivostok (Russia) in 2008 and for Russians became a bombshell:

We need now to recognize that this [native speaker] is a much broader category than it was a few years ago. I am still an example of a native speaker of American English and I can be an informant about my particular variety of the language. Randolph Quirk is still a native speaker of British English and can be an informant of that particular variety. In the same way, Yamuna Kachru is a native speaker of Indian English and she can be an informant on her particular variety of the language. Anne Pakir is a native speaker of Singapore English and Ma. Lourdes Bautista is a native speaker of Filipino English. Each of them can be an informant of their own variety of the language. I am willing to argue that Zoya Proshina is a native speaker of Russian English and Hu Wenzhong is a native speaker of Chinese English. Professor Proshina and Professor Hu may not be willing to accept my assessment today but Professor Kachru, Professor Pakir and Professor Bautista may be. Whatever the case, this is my understanding of the concept ‘native speaker’ from the perspective of world Englishes’ (Smith 2008: 70–1).

The idea of two types of native speakers was substantiated by Kachru in 1997 who differentiated between genetic and functional nativity. The traditional concept of *native speaker* is related to a genetic type, while functional nativity is ‘determined by the range and depth of a language in a society: *Range* refers to the domains of function, and *depth* refers to the degree of social penetration of the language. These two variables provide good indicators of comparative functions of languages in a society and of acquired identities and types of acculturation represented by a transplanted language’ (Kachru 1998: 92). No doubt, Chinese or Russian users of English are native speakers of their varieties functionally, and their functional nativity can easily reveal their cultural identity and even their genetic nativity.

We have gradually come to a very controversial issue discussed in linguistics and cultural studies today—the degree of associating world Englishes with cultures and the potential of English to express cultural identity. Two polar approaches have been taken in answering this question. On the one hand, there is a belief that global English is a ‘native-culture-free code’ (Pölzl 2003: 5), that there are neutral ‘culture-free varieties of English use[d] for international communication’ (Yano 2001: 130). German applied linguist Hüllen (1992) was one of the first to argue that English as an international language is used as a language of communication and not as a language of identification, thus divorcing the two functions of English. His idea found a number of supporters – House, for example, points out:

ELF can be regarded as a language for communication, that is, a useful instrument for making oneself understood in international encounters. It is instrumental in enabling communication with others who do not speak one’s own L1. In ELF use, speakers must continuously work out a joint basis for their interactions, locally construing and intersubjectively ratifying meanings. In using ELF, speakers are unlikely to conceive of it as a “language for identification”: it is local languages, and particularly an individual’s L1(s), which are likely to be the main determinants of identity, which means holding a stake in the collective linguistic-cultural capital that defines the L1 group and its members (House 2003: 560).
I am afraid I have to argue against this position. Whenever we use a live English variety, be it for a lingua franca purpose, that is, in intercultural communication settings, or even the more so for intercultural reasons, we express our own identity and our own culture, finding various strategies to be understood in our intentions. Thus, the variety we speak or write becomes a ‘language of identification’, a secondary means of self-identification, as it was termed by Russian scholar Kabakchi (1998), the primary means being our mother tongue. English identifies us whenever we look outside from behind the cultural curtain. The latest IAWE conferences and recent publications demonstrate that more and more researchers in cultural studies, cultural linguistics, and intercultural communication associate their research with the world Englishes paradigm due to this potential of the paradigm subject – among them are Nobuyuki Honna, Farzad Sharifian, Ian Malcolm, Maria Lebedko, Jia Yuxin, Stephanie Houghton, and many others.

Indeed, as it was brightly shown by Smith (1982) and Nelson (2011), it is not the formal differences between the varieties that make the most difficult part of intelligibility and intercultural communication via English. It is the cultural underpinnings that create the greatest challenge for intervarietal communicators’ interpretability and they need special emphasis in English language teaching and learning. I would like to illustrate this by two examples, with reference to the verbalization of Chinese and Russian cultural conceptualizations, by which, following Sharifian (2011: 5), I understand ‘conceptual structures such as “schemas”, “categories” and “conceptual metaphors”, which not only exist at the individual level of cognition but also develop at a higher level of cultural cognition, where they are constantly negotiated and renegotiated through generations of speakers within a cultural group, across time and space’.

In Chinese English, one of the main cultural conceptualizations is expressed by the English calque work unit, or direct loan danwei. A similar calque is found in Russian English, and given a long period of socialism in both countries and collectivism as a compatible typological feature of Chinese and Russian cultures, one might expect that work unit has the same meaning in both Chinese and Russian varieties. But these are mistaken expectations. In China, a work unit, or danwei is a place of employment, which played a crucial role during the period of socialist Chinese economy with state-owned enterprises. Prior to Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms a work unit was the principal method of implementing party policy, as it controlled housing, child care, schools, clinics, shops, services, post offices, etc. Before undertaking personal events such as travel, marriage, or even having children, an individual had to obtain permission from a work unit. These functions have never been characteristic of a Russian work unit (proizvodstvennyi kollectiv). It has always been more like today’s interpretation of the Chinese term that has stayed on to mean whatever organization you happen to be working for. Though now the terms prove to be semantically very close, the historical usage of the Chinese word may cause miscommunication between Russian and Chinese English-speaking communicators, nothing to say of users of other Englishes who might be misled by a dictionary, explaining the meaning of work unit as ‘a unit of measurement for work’ or by the Internet treating the term as ‘a single unit (e.g., studio, loft, or one bedroom) consisting of both a commercial/office and a residential component that is occupied by the same resident’, or ‘a strategic organisation working to promote and support youth work and services for young people,’ or ‘a strategic youth work development agency’ in the United Kingdom. None of the these definitions has to do with Chinese or Russian interpretation of the term.
It was just by chance that my eye grasped the second example to illustrate culture-bound expressions in Englishes. While looking for the contexts of use for the word *danwei*, I ran into the site with the same name: *Danwei.com* - a website that tracks Chinese media and Internet, an affiliate of the *Australian Centre on China in the World* at the Australian National University. An article with a somewhat strange headline drew my attention: “‘Most Beautiful Pregnant Woman” Safe and Sound’ by Goldman (2012). This is the main content of the article:

Today the front page of the *Market Star* features a picture of a woman in a hospital bed, with the headline: ‘The “most beautiful pregnant woman” will be discharged from the hospital today.’ The article tells the story of a woman in Suzhou who was carrying twins and noticed she wasn’t feeling them move as much on the evening of July 25. She went to a doctor and was immediately sent to the Provincial Hospital to give birth by cesarean section the next day. Yet in the ultrasound they found that one of the twins had died prematurely in the womb. The twins had been monozygotic, meaning they had both come from one egg, and shared a single amniotic sac. At 32 weeks, one had failed to develop. The other, a boy, was born and is now in stable condition.

Probably, I would have believed that the new mother had been the finalist in a Chinese beauty contest, unless at the end of the article, the journalist had not have explained:

The headline of this story is interesting, because people are usually only labeled ‘most beautiful’ after a selfless act of heroism. These stories have been fairly common over the past three months. Examples include: a ‘most beautiful teacher’ who threw herself in front of a bus to save her students, and ended up losing both legs; a ‘most beautiful driver’ who was hit by a piece of flying metal while driving and managed to steer his passengers to safety before dying himself; and a ‘most beautiful’ university student who spent an afternoon handing out water to construction workers on her own initiative. (Goldman 2012)

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, we may see from the above discussion, varieties of English, even those in the Expanding Circle, are developing their lexis on their own, and to communicate successfully we should be aware of their linguistic identifications. Revealing cultural identity when speaking in English as a communicative mediating tool is not an easy task for individuals and requires a special training, which will include raising awareness of the specifics of their own and other varieties, search for variant forms and communicative strategies to transfer the meaning. No easier is the listening and negotiating of other culture meanings belonging to conceptualizations in other varieties. This sets further perspectives for researchers and educators, while also encouraging cooperation between them. To conclude, world Englishes is a revolutionary paradigm of pivotal significance for both theory and practice of language teaching, learning, and researching. With its main principles of diversity, pluricentricity, inclusivity, variability, functionality, and equality, this paradigm has drastically changed many traditional concepts of linguistics and language methodology. The majority of these principles are grounded on the cultural underpinnings of the varieties of English serving their users as a means to communicate about their own cultures and to learn about the cultures of their communicators. Like any revolution, the WE paradigm has a number of controversies, which are debated by its proponents and opponents, and like many
revolutionary ideas it shakes off tranquility and conservatism of traditional school and infuses scholars and teachers with new ideas, optimism, and cultural enrichment.

NOTES

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